*Back Home by Chris Hardie*

**Keep running against the wind**

It was late May 1982 when I walked across the risers at Melrose-Mindoro High School. Earlier that day I had competed in the sectional track tournament, where I failed to advance to the state tournament in the discus. I needed to drive back in haste just to make the graduation ceremony.

It was the days before cell phones so my parents didn’t know how I had done at the track meet. They rushed to finish chores in order to make the ceremony. My father was on the school board and handed out diplomas.

As the class of 52 students came into the gym, Dad caught my eye from his seat on the stage. He lifted his eyebrows in an inquisitive fashion — his way of asking if I had advanced to state. I wrapped my hands around my throat in the universal sign of choking.

He smiled.

I laughed.

While I was disappointed in my performance on the field that day, the promise of life was ahead. I was young, strong and optimistic.

One of our class theme songs playing during a slideshow of our class journey was [“Time” by the Alan Parsons Project](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zhRzORqNa0E). Indeed time does keep flowing like a river. Since then I’ve watched my two children cross the high school- and college-graduation stages. And if the good Lord is willing, my grandchildren will join them in a few years.

One of my favorite artists is Bob Seger, whose album “Against the Wind” hit No. 1 in 1980. [The title track](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PBJRD1VkxmI) has great lyrics, speaking about the battle of life and what I believe is one of the best phrases ever written. “I wish I didn’t know now what I didn’t know then.”

Recently, I spoke about careers to a group of high school students. As I was researching the job market I compared the economy now to the days of malaise when I was in high school.

In June 1982, the national unemployment rate was 9.5%. The teenage unemployment rate was 23%; the nation was in the midst of a recession. The peak was in November and December 1982, when the nationwide unemployment rate was 10.8%. That’s the worst since the Great Depression — and even worse than the peak of the “Great Recession” that began in 2007. Unemployment was 10% in October 2009.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the economic term “stagflation” became all too familiar as our country grappled with double-digit inflation, increased unemployment and slow economic growth. Across rural America, the farm crisis of decreasing land prices, decreasing commodity prices and increased debt led to many foreclosures. Energy prices soared.

President Jimmy Carter in July 1979 delivered these words as part of what is known as his “Malaise Speech.”

“The threat is nearly invisible in ordinary ways,” Carter said. “It is a crisis of confidence. It is a crisis that strikes at the very heart and soul and spirit of our national will. We can see this crisis in the growing doubt about the meaning of our own lives and in the loss of a unity of purpose for our nation.”

I’m glad I didn’t know it then. Sherry and I married in September 1982. Yes, times were difficult, but I pulled some strings to snag a part-time job while enrolled in college. Within a year, I started working for the *La Crosse Tribune*. I learned first-hand about deadlines and commitments, what to leave in and what to leave out.

Some will argue we still have a crisis of confidence in our country and we are less unified than ever. It sure seems that way at times.

But I have faith in our young people, just as my parents did 37 years ago. This year’s high school graduates didn’t experience Sept. 11. They were in first- or second-grade during the Great Recession. They are entering a job market with 3.6% unemployment — 13 percent teenage unemployment — and a prime interest rate at 2.5% with 2.2% inflation.

Today’s graduates will be welcome in nearly any job field they select. Across the board — from laborers to carpenters, truck drivers to teachers — the opportunities abound for an excellent job.

What the 2019-me knows now is the message I shared with today’s students — the message I would have told my 1982-self who didn’t know then.

Find your purpose and pursue it with passion. You can drift through life or set your own course. It’s okay to not know now what you’ll know later. There’s always room in life for excellence and for people who make a difference.

Bob Seger was wrong about one thing. The years rolled quickly by.

But I am older.

And still running against the wind.

*Chris Hardie spent more than 30 years as a reporter, editor and publisher. He was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize and won dozens of state and national journalism awards. He is a former president of the Wisconsin Newspaper Association. Contact him at**chardie1963@gmail.com**.*